

Perth Craftsmen's Book

Some Examples of the Interpretation and Utilization of
Protestant Thought by Sixteenth-Century Scottish Townsmen

MARY B. VERSCHUUR, Ph.D.

The outbreak of the Scottish Reformation at Perth in May 1559 is best known from John Knox's description of the event. Knox's catch phrases concerning his sermon "vehement against idolatry" which aroused the "rascal multitude" and led to the "destruction of the monuments of idolatry" ring in our ears with all the familiarity of a Burns song or a favourite poem. However, Perth's star rôle was only a passing one. Knox and the Lords of the Congregation soon moved from their first success at Perth to capture and reform St Andrews, Stirling and Edinburgh, centres of learning, government and commerce, where influence, wealth and power were more plentiful than in a small provincial community.

Successive generations of Reformation historians have failed to find in Perth any of the widely accepted ingredients which stimulated reform movements elsewhere. University centres, for example, frequently became hot-beds of radical or revolutionary thought, but Perth had no university and consequently the town had no intellectual community of that sort to stimulate its consciousness. Likewise, Perth was not a centre of government, which might have attracted foreign diplomats or traders from already protestantized countries or communities, bringing with them "heretical" books or tracts with which to spread the message of religious reform. There were no articulate radicals like the Wedderburn brothers (of Dundee) to give popular expression to Perth's protestant sentiment. No Harlaw, Willock or Methven emerged from pre-Reformation Perth to provide forthright and stimulating preaching of the Word of God, and none of Knox's "dear sisters", those women who espoused his cause and his religion, are known to have lived in Perth. In short, sixteenth-century Perth possessed none of the pre-requisites which might have marked the town as a focal point of pre-Reformation protestant activism.

Recently, however, some evidence has come to light which, though it may not alter the picture radically, shows that there were some amongst the burgesses of Perth who heard and adopted the message of the continental reformers well before the official Reformation of Scotland. The evidence is contained in a bound collection of documents housed in the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, which bears on its spine the unlikely title of "The Convener Court Book of Perth".¹ The sub-title inside the cover

¹ Perth Museum and Art Gallery, MS Convener Court Book of Perth (hereafter CB).

provides a more accurate description of the contents and is as follows: "Original Letters and Papers Produced by the Craftsmen of the Burgh of Perth in Defence of their Ancient Rights and Privileges". Apart from a copy of the charter of David II to Perth in 1366, and one final item dated 1717, all of the other documents in the collection are of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century origin. There are 110 miscellaneous letters, extracts of court proceedings and decreets, as well as a number of papers containing arguments prepared by the craftsmen burgesses of Perth for defence of their privilege. Of the 110 items, 35 are dated prior to 1565 and it is amongst this latter group that the earliest expressions of reformed religious conviction amongst the craftsmen burgesses of Perth are to be found.

Before beginning any discussion of the contents of these documents, it seems important to say a few words about why the collection was first started, and to recount something of its known history since its first compilation in the sixteenth century.

In the words of one of the documents, sixteenth-century Perth was "nocht like utheris [towns] far fra the see cant and ane dry throchtwart toun and may nocht be ordorit like uthir borrowis. For as uthir townis is merchand tounis our towne is ane craftis toun and nocht like in Scotland. . . ."² This statement describes how certain burgesses of Perth viewed their town about 1560 and it provides a fairly accurate picture of the economic and social structure of Perth in the middle of the sixteenth century. Where the coastal burghs flourished on the profits of foreign trade and commerce, Perth had become more and more isolated from that source of wealth as the Tay silted up and Perth's merchants were forced to conduct their business through factors in the port towns. However, Perth did not fall into total decline but instead developed into a manufacturing centre where craftsmen outnumbered merchants and where the wealth of the craftsmen burgesses was almost equal to that of the merchant burgesses.³

As their wealth increased so did their appetites for political power and social prestige and throughout the sixteenth century the craftsmen of Perth carried on a vociferous campaign to improve their political standing vis-à-vis the merchant burgesses. They had made considerable gains, having won two seats on the burgh council in 1534 and capturing one of the four bailies' seats in 1544. However, in the late 1550s their position was being seriously threatened, firstly by the act of parliament against craftsmen in

² CB. no. 34, "Representation by the craftsmen of Perth to Parliament of their grievances against the merchants".

³ Mary Verschuur, "Perth and the Reformation Society and Reform: 1540-1560", Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow (1985), 155 (hereafter Verschuur Thesis). See also *The Early Modern Town in Scotland*, ed. M. Lynch (London, 1986) particularly chapters 1 and 2.

burghs⁴ passed by parliament in 1555 and then again in 1560 when the merchant burgesses of Perth totally excluded the craftsmen from any participation in the process of selecting the town's delegates to the Reformation parliament.

These perceived attacks on their positions prompted the craftsmen of Perth to initiate an active campaign to have their rights and privileges confirmed by decree of court and it was in preparation for the defence of their ancient rights and privileges that they originally set about gathering this collection of documents. Their advisor, who may have been their procurator or some high ranking official sympathetic to their cause counselled them thus:

“It is necesser till collect and gaddyr all the instancis that can be hed of the craftismen that hes brukit officis of ald, yeir be yeir from the first on to the last for till preiff and verefy that your possessioun in brwkyng of officis within this burght is maist anceant prescryvit and admitit past memor of man. Because the grund of your haille actionn sall consist heirupoun as apperis of the lawis of the realm acts and statutis thairrof”.⁵

Thus began the collection of all the relevant documentation which might help prove the craftsmen's claims to office-holding within the burgh of Perth. Along with gathering grants and letters from statesmen and extracts of court decreets in their favour which might prove useful, the craftsmen also prepared several lengthy arguments to refute the charges raised against them by the merchants and to defend the honour of labour. Some of these items are of particular interest here as they make use of biblical quotations and scriptural allusions which the craftsmen of Perth drew upon to provide added justification to their arguments.

Following a rather inconclusive end to the dispute of 1560/61 the documents collected at that time appear to have been put aside or consigned to the deacon convener's safe keeping. Other documents were added to the collection thereafter and the original ones were probably made use of again towards the end of the seventeenth century when another conflict arose between the merchants and craftsmen of Perth. In 1710 the collection was “discovered” by the then deacon convener and his clerk who inventoried all the items extant at that time. The inventory of 1710 is not now with the collection but is one of many loose documents forming part of the Perth Burgh Records collection in the

⁴ *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland* (hereafter *APS*), ii, 497.

⁵ CB, no. 29, “Information for the craftsmen of Perth to support their privilege of electing and being elected as bailies and councillors”.

Sandeman Library at Perth.⁶ It lists 19 items, ten of which pertain to the period under study. At least two of these ten items found with the documents in 1710 are no longer with the present collection.

Between 1710 and 1907 the collection seems to have been ignored. In 1907, someone decided to see to its preservation and not only did this person arrange and compile the documents into what he considered to be some sort of chronological order but he had them interleaved and mounted into a bound volume which is the one found today at the Perth Museum and Art Gallery. Furthermore the arranger transcribed all of the documents, some verbatim and some merely summarized. These transcriptions are useful to the researcher but should not be wholly relied upon. For example, when put to closer examination and cross-referenced with other burgh records, the dates which the arranger has assigned to some of the otherwise undated documents are found to be debatable if not erroneous.⁷ Certain documents found amongst the first 35 items in the collection provide the evidence for the central thesis of this paper, namely that protestantism was nurtured in pre-Reformation Perth, despite the lack of solid evidence for the existence of a privy kirk or for any of the other widely accepted media for the spread of protestant thought.

Historians of sixteenth-century urban reformation movements have frequently observed that those most prone to clamour for social and political privilege in towns were the same people who were most likely to espouse religious reform.⁸ This would appear to have been very much the case in pre-Reformation Perth where the craftsmen burgesses engaged in a deliberate campaign throughout the 1520s, 30s and 40s to improve their social and political power in the town. They obtained special charters and writs of kings and regents, they appealed to central courts for decreets in their favour and when all else failed that were not averse to raising a riot or engineering a coup to win some new concession or to defeat some challenge to their expanding socio-political consciousness. Perth's craftsmen were also noticeable amongst the town's earliest known protestants.

⁶ Sandeman Library, Perth Burgh Records, B59/23/38, "Inventar of all the material writs relating to the trades of the burgh of Perth found in the convener's chest by Patrick Reoch, Deacon Convener and other members of that court and John Mercer their clerk, 1710 years".

⁷ The dating of the documents is discussed in Verschuur Thesis, Appendix a. Other points requiring attention when following the transcription include the facts that the transcriber's titles are sometimes misleading, his editorial summaries are sometimes too general and proper names should be cross referenced for accuracy.

⁸ A. G. Dickens *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (London, 1974), 159, 188; S. Ozment *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven, 1975), 123, 124, 131; N. Z. Davis "The Sacred and the Body Social in Sixteenth Century Lyons", *Past and Present*, 90 (1981), 47-50.

It is not clear at what point the craftsmen of Perth deliberately adopted the use of protestant terminology in their arguments, or realized the usefulness of protestant teaching as an aid to their campaign. Certainly, protestant thought had infiltrated the burgh by the 1530s and the first recipients of its message appear to have been men of religion like John MacAlpine prior of the Dominican friary at Perth and Andrew Charteris, a Carthusian, both of whom fled from the burgh and from Scotland on their conversion to the teachings of Martin Luther. The first citizen of Perth, known to have been accused of heresy was baxter burgess John Cameron who was forfeited in May 1539.⁹ Within five years of Cameron's forfeiture, four other craftsmen burgesses of Perth and the wife of one of the four were put to death as heretics following upon a brief trial conducted by the governor and the cardinal at Perth in January 1544.¹⁰

The charge brought against the five was one of "breaking the acts of Parliament"¹¹ but various other misdemeanours such as eating meat on Friday, refusing to pray to the Virgin Mary, challenging a friar at his sermon and desecrating a statue were also levelled against the "heretics". For these crimes, the five were put to death.¹² The point which has escaped the attention of those who have recorded the trials is that all five of the accused were craftspeople. Calderwood and others who have used him as their source claim that Robert Lamb, one of the accused was a merchant burgess, but in fact he was a craftsman, being by trade a maltman.¹³ Maltmen in sixteenth-century Perth were amongst the most wealthy craftsmen but they had no official recognition and therefore had no incorporation or craft guild. Without any official status they could not hold public offices although they could become burgesses and guild brothers. In the seventeenth century (as the later documents in the collection indicate) the maltmen of Perth associated themselves with the merchant burgesses and in fact sided with the merchants in a dispute with the craftsmen¹⁴ but in the

⁹ *Registrum Secreti Sigilli Regum Scotorum* (hereafter *RSS*), ii, no. 3033. For broader treatment of the development of protestantism amongst clerics and burgesses throughout Scotland during this period see James Kirk "The 'Privy Kirks' and their antecedents; the Hidden Face of Scottish Protestantism", *Voluntary Religion*, edd. W. J. Sheils and D. Wood (Oxford, 1986), 155-170.

¹⁰ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* (hereafter *TA*), viii, 252, 258.

¹¹ *RSS*, iii, no. 611.

¹² The most detailed narrative account of the trials is the one by David Calderwood contained in his *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. Thomas Thompson, 8 vols. (Edinburgh, 1842) i, 171-75. John Knox also refers to the trials in his *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, ed. W. C. Dickinson, 2 vols. (London, 1949), i, 55, but Knox is not very accurate in his recounting of details.

¹³ This identification is made in CB, no. 34.

¹⁴ CB, no. 48, "Grounds of complaint by the merchants and maltmen of Perth against the craftsmen", dated 1657.

sixteenth century maltmen were wealthy but politically impotent craftsmen.

The issue here is not the historiography of the heretic trials at Perth which have had adequate press over the years, but rather to correct the misconception that Lamb was a merchant since the fact that all five who were put to death were craftspeople has particular significance here. That the information has perhaps been overlooked is not surprising since it is contained in one of the documents drawn up by the craftsmen in about 1560 and has remained buried in that collection, possibly more deeply so due to the later association between maltmen and merchants in Perth.

The information that Lamb was a maltman, and hence a craftsman rather than a merchant, sheds new light on the whole affair of the heretic trials at Perth. The authorities were not merely making an example of Perth or of religious dissenters. Their wrath was directed at the craftspeople of Perth and possibly therefore at craftspeople in general. Whatever the reason for the severity of their punishment the authorities obviously perceived a serious threat, probably to more than the religious order, in the potential power and influence of activist craftspeople. This fact is corroborated by David Calderwood who records in his *History* that the executions took place surrounded by "a great band of armed men (for they feared a rebellion in the town)".¹⁵

The fear of insurrection by craftsmen burgesses might also explain why John Elder, a merchant burgess of Perth who fled the town at the coming of the governor's entourage, was allowed to purchase a remission, (for £200) while Robert Lamb was put to death.¹⁶ Apart from not having interrupted a friar at his preaching the charge against Elder was the same as that laid against Robert Lamb, yet the merchant was allowed to compound for his "breaking the act of parliament" while the craftsman was put to death. One might argue that the former had the money needed to pay the very steep fine imposed while the latter did not, but that is debatable since Christine Piper, the widow of the executed James Hunter, flesher, came up with the same sum of money (£200) to purchase back her husband's and Robert Lamb's forfeited goods on the same day that Elder bought his remission.¹⁷

All of the evidence seems to suggest that from at least as early as the 1540s the craftsmen of Perth were the social group who were most attracted to protestantism. Lamb's interruption of the preaching friar and his disputing upon the scripture in quiet conventions is surely indicative of an ability to read and to understand the scriptures and their teachings. Furthermore, it is evident that craftsmen were perceived by the authorities as the

¹⁵ Calderwood, *History*, i, 173.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 175; Knox, *History*, i, 55; RSS, iii, no. 612; TA, viii, 219.

¹⁷ RSS, iii, no. 611.

group most inclined to heresy or of succumbing to Lutheran or other forms of protestant teaching. It is also quite clear that in 1544 at least some of the craftsmen burgesses of Perth displayed evidence of being both protestants and political activists, for they won a very significant political concession at Michaelmas 1544 when one of their number was elected as a bailie of the burgh (and the practice was continued every year thereafter).¹⁸ In 1544 there may not have been any conscious adoption of the scripture principle on the part of the craftsmen burgesses of Perth, and there is no surviving evidence to link their political gain to anything other than coercion and the sympathy and support of the provost for their cause. However, the close association noted by Reformation historians between socially and politically motivated burgesses and this group's espousal of the cause for religious reform seems to have been present in Perth by the mid-1540s.

Apart from a few outbreaks of anti-clericalism the outward signs of social, political and religious unrest lay dormant in Perth for almost a decade after the repression of the heretics. Passage of an act against craftsmen in burghs by the parliament of 1555 reawakened the socio-political rivalry with renewed intensity and in the late summer of 1555 the craftsmen burgesses of Perth began an active campaign of defending their privilege by seeking the help of the central courts, the queen regent and any of her councillors upon whom they could call. In preparing their defences they began to write out their arguments, and it is at this point that we see from the documents in the Craftsmen's Collection the first real evidence of protestant thought being utilized by the craftsmen of Perth.

One of the earliest of these written arguments is an appeal entitled "Grounds of the Debate Between Merchants and Craftsmen in Burghs".¹⁹ The "Grounds of the Debate" is not dated. Likewise there is no formal greeting or addressee to tell for whom the message was intended. Certain paragraphs call upon "your weysdwims"²⁰ to consider the arguments contained therein. This form of address is not a common one, but since the arguments were presented on behalf of craftsmen in burghs, they were most likely to have been drawn up for presentation to some body representing all burghs, that is, the Convention of Burghs. The nature of the contents, which will be explained below, bring out some quite radical points, hardly fit for the eyes and ears of the secular ruling establishment although they might have been acceptable to burgesses. The contents are also relevant to the

¹⁸ Sandeman Library, Perth Burgh Records, Perth Burgh Court Book, B59/12/2 fo. 3v and following.

¹⁹ CB, no. 30, "Grounds of the debate between the merchants and crafts of Perth in form of a petition".

²⁰ "your wysdomes" a title of dignity and respect, especially membership of a deliberative assembly, *OED*.

revocation of the act of parliament against craftsmen and the language used by the “debaters” is to be found in other documents obtained in 1556, particularly in the charter issued to the craftsmen of Perth in May of that year which will be discussed below.

There are two major arguments in the “Grounds of the Debate”. The first questions the notion that there can really be any hierarchy among brothers and the second attacks idleness and all those who do not work. In the first, the author or authors use the example of a man whose several sons variously enter different occupations, the church, merchandise and craftsmanship. All three are brothers, and yet society forces upon them a hierarchy which gives the kirkman pre-eminence above all the rest, and places the merchant above the craftsman. There cannot be a hierarchy such as this one amongst brothers it is argued; a point which is justified, not by the common-sense idea that all three men are from the same family but by a biblical criterion backed up by the use of a biblical quotation.²¹

The attack on idleness divides society into five categories, four of which are idle and one of which supports all the others. In this part of the “Grounds of the Debate” the virtuous one fifth is defined as the “labourers of the world”. The idlers are not just those who cannot or will not work (one fifth) but they are also kirkmen (one fifth), emperors, kings and nobles (one fifth) and soldiers or men of war (one fifth). The fact that emperors, kings and nobles, i.e. the ruling secular establishment are included in this attack must mean that this document was not meant for their eyes. Furthermore, the labourers of the world are not just craftsmen, but embrace all those who worked to support the rest. The emphasis in this document however, is on those who worked in burghs, and no particular mention is made of the much larger percentage of the working population who tilled the soil. As in the first argument, idleness is not considered as being antithetical to any social or political system, but it is said to be against God’s will for one fifth of the population to support the other four fifths.

The document is clearly not an attack on merchants. Burgh labourers included merchants and craftsmen who had common interests and a common grievance against all the rest of society. According to this argument, all burgh labourers were called upon to unite. It was pointed out that all craftsmen who worked were as good as merchants, and if there were more of the former there would be fewer beggars and idlers about. Idleness, it was claimed, was undesirable both for the common weal of the realm and because it was against God’s will.

The text is very careful in its criticism of merchants, a point which should also be noted in support of the suggestion that this document was drawn up for presentation to a Convention of

²¹ CB, no. 30 (taken from 128th Psalm).

Burghs. It is also quite radical in its argument and strongly protestant in its references to biblical authority. Those who prepared it must have anticipated that the hearers would not be hostile to the arguments or to the references to psalms and epistles. In the latter reference the text provides striking and early evidence of the move to protestant opinion among craftsmen. It also echoes the sentiment expressed in Martin Bucer's pamphlet entitled "One Should Not Live For Oneself Alone and How to go About it".²² There was only one edition of this pamphlet published in Strasbourg in 1523 which makes it unlikely that it was known in Perth in the 1550s, but there is a striking similarity of argument between the "Grounds of the Debate" and Bucer's pamphlet. Bucer concluded that farmers and those who engaged in the handicraft trades were performing the most Christian occupations. He contrasted these workers to merchants and clergymen who he claimed lived off the sweat of others without doing anything themselves, and who, as a result, were guilty of disobeying God's command.²³

None of the other documents in the craftsmen's collection is as clear as the "Grounds of the Debate" in its use of religious argument and biblical reference. The first quotation is taken from the psalms which were regarded by Luther and many of his followers, including the Scot Alexander Alesius, as the most practical tool for communicating "right doctrine".²⁴ The references to idleness would seem to indicate a familiarity with the New Testament, in particular with the Gospel of Matthew.

As to the date of the "Grounds of the Debate", it is certainly pre-1559 because of its description of the church hierarchy about which it is curiously neutral. (Although they are one of the non-working four fifths kirkmen are not singled out for condemnation, and in this sense the document is not an attack on the old church.) The document is probably 1555 or later, because of the development of the Perth dispute. The merchants of Perth intensified their attacks on the craftsmen beginning in February 1556; the act of parliament against craftsmen in burghs was revoked on 16 April 1556.²⁵ The "Grounds of the Debate" could quite probably have been drawn up as an argument for the revocation of the act. The fact that it is included amongst the documents belonging to Perth's craftsmen and that no similar

²² Ozment, *Reformation in the Cities*, 64-66.

²³ *Ibid.* See also James Kirk "The Influence of Calvinism on the Scottish Reformation" in *RSCHS*, xviii (1974), esp. 179 where he discusses Bucer's influence on the Scottish Church. See further J. Kirk, *The Second Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh, 1980), 216 n. 167, and index under Bucer.

²⁴ G. Wiedermann "Alexander Alesius' Lectures on the Psalms at Cambridge, 1536", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37 (1986), 24.

²⁵ *Registrum Magnii Sigilli Scottorum* (hereafter *RMS*), iv, no. 1054.

document seems to be contained in other collections certainly suggests that this complaint originated in Perth.

In addition to the general revocation of the act the craftsmen of Perth sought and received a particular revocation which was dated 28 May 1556.²⁶ This gift noted that the craftsmen of Perth were to have “equal privilege offices and liberties with the merchants” and was directed to the burgh “respecting the knowledge that the town is upheld by the increase and prosperity of the crafts and that craftsmen outnumber the rest of the population”,²⁷ a sentiment which echoes the value of labour and the four fifths/one fifth argument of the “Grounds of the Debate”.

Before continuing further it should perhaps be mentioned here that the only copies of the scriptures known to have existed in pre-Reformation Perth were in the hands of craftsmen burgesses. Sometime before June 1547, David Schang, a wright burghess of Perth, acquired a copy of the New Testament from John Chalmer, a merchant burghess. When Chalmer died, his heir wanted the Testament back but Schang claimed that he had paid the deceased 28s. for the book and that it was lawfully his. The assize of court found otherwise and charged Schang to pay Chalmer’s heirs 40s. if he wished to retain the book. There is no further record of this copy of the New Testament but the court case confirms the circulation of at least one copy of that work in Perth in the 1540s and in the hands of a craftsman burghess. Furthermore, the burgh court of Perth does not appear to have made any attempt to suppress or to confiscate the book. No one seemed to object to the principle of possession.²⁸

Martin Murdeson was the son of Patrick Murdeson, a baxter burghess of Perth. Martin was also the owner, in 1558, of a Coverdale Bible, published in Zürich in 1550.²⁹ Martin may have acquired his interest in protestantism and possibly his Bible while he was on the continent. He and fellow citizen of Perth James Rhynd met in Danzig, sometime prior to March 1552, at which time Murdeson had lent Rhynd some money.³⁰ Little else has come to

²⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 1076. There was a copy of this charter amongst the craftsmen’s documents in 1710 (B59/23/38), but it is no longer with the present collection. Copies of this charter and of the queen’s letter are also listed in the *Calendar of Laing Charters AD 854-1837 Belonging to the University of Edinburgh*, ed. J. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1899), nos. 650, 651.

²⁷ *RMS*, iv, no. 1076.

²⁸ Sandeman Library, Perth, Burgh Court Book, B59/12/3, fo. 4r.

²⁹ *The Bibliothek*, 11:3 (1982), 58. Dr Durkan found that there was an English New Testament of Tyndale or Coverdale being read in Ayr about 1537, *RSCHS*, xxi (1982), 142.

³⁰ Sandeman Library, Perth, Burgh Court Book, B59/12/3, fo. 200r. Note too that James Rhynd was one of the bailies of Perth deposed by the governor and the cardinal when they came to Perth in January 1544 to try the heretics and to carry out a partial purge of the burgh administration. See Verschuur Thesis, 351-52.

light about Martin Murdeson to date, but it is known that he was in Perth in September of 1559 when he sold his half interest in his late father's property on the Northgate to his younger brother Andrew.³¹ The Murdeson family did not take any active part in the political affairs of Perth in the 1550s, as evidenced by extant burgh records, but they do appear to have had familial and business connections with other known protestants in Perth,³² and Martin's possession of the Bible in 1558 would probably mean that it was available for reference in Perth at that time.

Although the vernacular Bible probably provided a wealth of new material and inspiration for the protestants of Perth, it was perhaps only one of several tools available to protestants throughout Europe by the middle of the sixteenth century. Tracts, sermons, commentaries on the scriptures and articles of faith had appeared in print and had received wide circulation, and although no specific texts or sermons have been found amongst the Craftsmen's Collection it seems likely that John Knox's "Letter to the Commonalty of Scotland"³³ was circulated and read in Perth. The "Letter" which was dated at Geneva on 14 July 1558 may have provided another argument to encourage certain elements of the population towards a protestant faith. According to Laing, the "Letter" had more impact on those to whom it was addressed, than did Knox's "Appellation to the Nobles" published shortly before.³⁴

Knox's "Letter to the Commonalty" stressed that all men were equally God's creatures and were all equally required to believe in Christ as the Saviour in order to win salvation. Knox wrote that every man, no matter what his station in life, had equal responsibility with every other man, king or noble, merchant or pauper, to preach salvation through the Word of God. And finally, all who truthfully taught the Word and had faith could expect an equal reward in the life hereafter.

This public promise of equality before God presented an appealing idea at a critical point in the growth of the protestant movement. The commonalty to whom this letter was addressed would almost certainly have to have been literate in order to enjoy the full impact of this message and in 1558, the literate commonalty

³¹ Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh (hereafter SRO), Protocol Books of Sir Henry Elder, 3 vols (hereafter Elder) B59/1/1, fo. 199r.

³² The elder Murdeson's wife, and possibly the mother of Martin, was Janet Cristeson. (Elder, i, fo. 93r.) Cristeson was a name associated with other protestant families in town, the most notorious of whom in this context was Robert Cristeson, wife of Violet Hunter who was the daughter of 1544 heretic James Hunter. (Ibid., fo. 16v; RSS, iii, no. 611). I cannot verify any direct relationship between Robert C. and Janet C.

³³ *The Works of John Knox* (hereafter Knox, *Works*), 6 vols. ed. D. Laing (Edinburgh, 1846), iv, 523-38.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 523n.

were most likely to have been burgesses in urban communities. There is little doubt that the craftsmen burgesses of Perth sought parity with the merchants in the political sphere and in the "Letter" Knox was promising them equality in the religious sphere.

The conversion of Perth probably took place during the winter of 1558-59 for according to Knox the town had only "lately received the order of Common Prayer" before the Lords of the Congregation arrived there in May 1559, and was at that time "young and rude in Christ".³⁵ The conditions under which the conversion of Perth took place are made abundantly clear in this description drawn from one of the documents in the craftsmen's collection:

"An sen God sterit up our hail communitie of merchandis and craftis be assistance of His Holy Spreit to be jonit in ane congregatioun of Crist being memborris of his misticall body resavit His holy Word and promise amangis us . . ."³⁶

All the tenets of the reformed religion are woven into this statement; the Congregation of all believers forming part of the mystical body of Christ; faith represented through acceptance of the Word and guided by the Holy Spirit; God's promise, unspecified, but surely the heavenly reward. All appear to have been grasped by the "whole community of craftsmen burgesses of Perth"³⁷ who had supported the Reformation wholeheartedly.

Perth was thoroughly protestantized by the time the Reformation parliament had "defined and authorized" the Scottish Reformation.³⁸ Ironically perhaps, the first recorded preacher at Perth, other than Knox on the eventful days of May 1559, was none other than a craftsmen turned protestant preacher, William Harlaw, a former Cannongate tailor. Harlaw was acting as "minister for the tyme" in the parish kirk at Perth in April 1560,³⁹ but it was not until December 1560 that Perth's first permanent minister, Mr John Row, was in residence.

The unity and harmony of the heady days of reform were soon dissolved as the craftsmen found their hopes and aspirations unfulfilled and thwarted within a few months of the reform of religion. Further down in the same paragraph from which the above quotation was taken the craftsmen describe how, within a year of May 1559, they found themselves once again as victims of persecution while their fellow merchant burgesses acted as "Barbis citinar in Jerusalem who having received God's promise declined

³⁵ Knox, *History*, i, 163; *Works*, vi, 22; Verschuur Thesis, 444-449, 453.

³⁶ Perth Museum, CB, no. 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ M. Lynch, "Scottish Calvinism 1559-1638", in *International Calvinism 1541-1715*, ed. M. Prestwich (Oxford, 1985), 227.

³⁹ SRO, Elder, B59/1/1, fo. 84r.

therefrom and turned to his original purpose''.⁴⁰ So they too felt that they had been deluded and deceived by their fellow townsmen, the merchant burgesses.

The concepts of equality, brotherhood, and love of neighbour are strongly emphasized in two documents included in the craftsmen's collection which date from the period of the Reformation.⁴¹ It has already been shown that in the "Grounds of the Debate", brotherly love in a very literal sense was the first theme invoked by the author or authors. In the summer of 1560, the craftsmen of Perth used this theme again to express their dissatisfaction at the disaffection and slight perpetrated against them by their fellow burgesses and co-religionists the merchant burgesses of Perth. The craftsmen felt strongly that they should be treated as faithful brothers and neighbours, particularly in light of the fact that the Word of God was amongst the whole community whereby all contention ought to have been set aside.⁴²

The problem which provoked the outcry made by the craftsmen burgesses of Perth in July 1560, had very little to do with religion *per se*; however, those piqued perceived the problem as somehow being connected with the new religious teaching. Their complaint was against their omission from a purely secular event concerning political power in the earthly kingdom, but, as they saw it, one of the hoped for rewards of religious reform, namely the equality of brotherhood, had been denied them. In their arguments to reconcile the perceived injustice the craftsmen of Perth showed a working knowledge of biblical teaching and a thorough commitment to the Reformation.

Put quite simply, the merchants on the burgh council had appointed commissioners to the parliament of August 1560 without consulting any of the craftsmen burgesses, even those on the council, let alone any of the deacons of crafts. This was both unethical and prejudicial but was hardly against God's law. The craftsmen however, were incensed and on 26 July they entered an official protest before the Perth Burgh Court.⁴³ Having noted their exclusion from the political process of choosing the town's delegates to the parliament of August 1560, the craftsmen asked that their grievance concerning this affront be arbitrated by none other than "Doctor Johne Knox or ony uthir newtrall godlie

⁴⁰ CB, no. 34. I am grateful to Dr Richard Kyle for helping me to identify this quotation from Acts 4:36 to 5:11 as one of the few New Testament passages that speaks of sinning against the Holy Spirit.

⁴¹ CB, nos. 22 and 34. No. 22, "Protest by the deacons of crafts of Perth anent the election of commissioners to Parliament; and proposing arbitration by Doctor John Knox or others". No. 34, "Representation by the craftsmen of Perth to Parliament of their grievances against the merchants".

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, no. 22.

man".⁴⁴ This reference to Knox as a possible arbitrator in the dispute demonstrates the craftsmen's attachment to and respect for the preacher. The use of the title "Doctor" may have been an attempt by the craftsmen to exaggerate the qualifications of their mentor, but it is more likely that they were familiar with Calvin's four ministries of the church. Calvin assigned doctors to the second of the four orders raised up by God to help the faithful better understand the scriptures. Their task was to teach sound doctrine to the faithful.⁴⁵ It would seem that the craftsmen had interpreted the matter of equality in the sight of God literally and had transposed the concept from the religious to the secular sphere. In calling upon Knox, they sought the expert advice of a "Doctor" of the reformed faith to judge their dilemma and to interpret it in its correct context.

Five days later the craftsmen drew up a formal commission to three of their number to represent the burgh of Perth at the parliament which was to convene in Edinburgh on 2 August.⁴⁶ Then they compiled the "Representation by the craftsmen of Perth to Parliament of their grievances against the merchants".⁴⁷ One must assume that they hoped that their commissioners would have the opportunity to deliver the "Representation to Parliament" but the sederunt for that meeting does not list any of those named in the commission as having represented Perth at the Reformation parliament.⁴⁸

In the "Representation",⁴⁹ as in the appeal to Knox, the authors reminded their intended readers and hearers of their loyalty and devotion to the reformed religion by using its terminology (quite appropriately) to document their arguments. They seemed to have little doubt about the sympathies of those who would be in attendance at the meeting by offering their intended audience a measure of their own protestant conviction. The "Representation" is full of appeals made "for God's sake", "for the love of God", "God willing" and "thanks to the Lord". In recounting their grievances the craftsmen end many of the accounts of alleged oppression, persecution and excessive taxations by adding some biblical reference. For example, when telling of the injustice of the act of parliament of 1555 against craftsmen in burghs, they suggest that the authority vested in the burgh council to choose "visitors" for each craft could easily result in the appointment of "Judas" who would undermine the integrity of craftsmen. In another example the craftsmen complained of being the victims of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ R. Stauffer, "Calvin", *International Calvinism*, ed. Prestwich, 23, 26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 33. "Commission by the council and deacons of crafts of Perth to some persons to represent them in Parliament".

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 34.

⁴⁸ *APS*, ii, 605-06.

⁴⁹ *CB*, no. 34.

discrimination by the dean of guild and his associates even “though they [the craftsmen] had the riches of Solomon and the wisdom of Job”. According to their account of the heretic trials of 1544, also brought up in this list of grievances the craftsmen claimed that the only desire of the man who challenged the friar at his preaching was to urge the preacher to show “God [*sic*] Word treulie”. Merchants and craftsmen alike, the authors claimed, were all united in a congregation and were all members of the same mystical body of Christ. Surely, the craftsmen argued, if the members of the same body were at discordance with one another then the whole organism suffered. Then taking a very righteous position the craftsmen asked parliament to give them their just share of authority so that “we sall leirne thame [the merchants of our burgh] to use thame selfis mair vertuous”.⁵⁰

But, no matter how they camouflaged it, their objective of a voice in parliament remained a secular goal. The appeal to John Knox to help them gain appointment and the petition to parliament, when taken together, demonstrate quite clearly that the craftsmen of Perth were willing to use any means at their disposal to achieve what they considered to be their just reward as members of the mystical body of Christ and as faithful brothers and neighbours; “half and half as wear and euir hes bene”.⁵¹

The formal abolition of the old religion was accomplished by the parliament which met in Edinburgh in August 1560. A new Confession of Faith was adopted and the revolutionary state of affairs, which had existed in Scotland since John Knox’s sermon at Perth 14 months previously, officially came to an end. The “Representation” drawn up by the craftsmen of Perth was probably never heard by those who sat in parliament that summer and if the craftsmen’s commissioners went to Edinburgh with their “Representation”, they probably came home disappointed. However, it would appear from subsequent events that they did not give up in their pursuit of political representation equal with that of the merchant burgesses, but they began to move away from the religious argument towards basing their demand solely on legal precedent and title.

The documents in the craftsmen’s collection indicate that later in 1560 the craftsmen of Perth decided to revert to their old practice of intimidation in trying to win parity with the merchants.⁵² In order to have an equal voice in the affairs of the burgh, they proposed to place an additional table in the revestry of the kirk, where the town council met, so that the deacons of crafts could attend and participate in the council meetings. Action based on

⁵⁰ All of the quotations in this paragraph are taken from CB, no. 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² CB, no. 23. “Matters of complaint by the merchants of Perth against the craftsmen, represented to a Convention of Burghs”.

force seems to have supplanted moral argument and it would appear that the craftsmen of Perth were about to try intimidation once again as they had done in 1543 and again in 1556 when they won political concessions at the expense of the merchants.⁵³ Then in December 1560 another full-blown political conflict erupted in the town of Perth which perhaps overshadowed the affair of adding seats to the council by force, for having initiated that ploy, the craftsmen quickly abandoned it in favour of pursuing the matter along legal lines.

Acting on the advice of some mentor, the extant evidence indicates that the craftsmen were advised to gather together all the documentation they could accumulate to show their possession of offices in Perth “past memory of man”.⁵⁴ This, they were told, they should bring to Edinburgh for consideration by the Lords so that justice could be ministered. Furthermore, they were advised that under no circumstances should they absent themselves from or miss the forthcoming meeting on 15 January 1561 at which they would have the opportunity to defend their rights and privileges.⁵⁵ The letter issuing this warning was addressed to the craftsmen as “our traist friends” and was signed by “Your gud friends James Hamilton, James Stewart and John Erskine”,⁵⁶ all three renowned leaders of the Congregation. In urging the craftsmen to attend, the protestant leaders told the men of Perth to refer “to our lovit servitour Maister Johnne Row your minister to declare yow our forder mynd in this mater”.⁵⁷ This letter suggests that the craftsmen burgesses of Perth had important friends in high places who could intercede for them. It also indicates that the minister was a trusted friend of the protestant leaders and of the craftsmen of Perth. He could be relied upon to pass on messages without prejudice.

The letter from the statesmen to the craftsmen of Perth was written on 28 December 1560. On 11 January, the provost of Perth was out of town and the common seal was not available to the bailies and council of the burgh. However, not wanting to be remiss in appointing commissioners as requested, 257 members of the community got together and signed a commission appointing two of their number to attend the meeting in Edinburgh on 15 January

⁵³ Verschuur Thesis, 347-349; 429-435.

⁵⁴ CB, no. 29.

⁵⁵ CB, no. 35. “Letter from some statesmen to the craftsmen of Perth to compear with the merchants for settlement of their disputes”. A convention of nobles was held in Edinburgh on 17 January 1561 to approve *The First Book of Discipline*. It is possible that this was the group which was to hear the craftsmen’s arguments.

⁵⁶ CB, no. 35.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

as official representatives of the burgh of Perth.⁵⁸ No doubt they collected all the signatures to give the document greater weight, for they may have been concerned lest it not be accepted as the commission to the parliament had not been accepted a few months earlier.

With this commission the documents in the Craftsmen's Collection, concerning this issue, come to an abrupt end. There are several items containing arguments prepared by the merchants and craftsmen against one another and several others detailing the craftsmen's responses to the merchants' charges, but these are all thoroughly legal in their reasoning and make no further reference to the coming of the Word of God or to the Bible as a precedent for the establishment of secular power. To date, the examination of other records for this time period has failed to reveal anything further about this issue.

Scanty burgh records and no kirk session papers for the 1560s make it difficult to assess the result of this power struggle between the merchants and craftsmen of Perth or even to follow it to its conclusion. What the documents in the Craftsmen's Collection offer, however, is a glimpse of the avowed protestant convictions of the craftsmen burgesses of Perth at a time when many other elements of the population of Scotland were still wavering between the old and the new religions.

The documents are tantalizing in that they reveal that something was afoot in Perth and that at least some segments of the population there were aware and articulate enough to grasp and to use protestant thought as a form of argument to support secular claims. The evidence is limited and could represent no more than it actually is, but it seems more likely to be all that remains as evidence of a far greater understanding of the protestant ethic in pre-Reformation Perth than had previously been thought to have been present there, and it seems clear that protestant ideas were not uncommon amongst craftsmen burgesses in Perth before 1559. The documents also show that the pattern of reform which developed in Perth was not unlike patterns of reform found elsewhere throughout Europe.

Through political activism in the early part of the sixteenth century the craftsmen burgesses of Perth had created a niche for themselves in the political organization, or oligarchy, of the burgh. Having won some political concessions, they saw in the personal appeal of the reformed religion with its priesthood of all believers, united by faith into one congregation, the opportunity to improve their social position vis-à-vis the merchants and also to increase their share of the political power. Ideologically and socially, the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 23A, "Commission to Patrick Murray and George Johnson bailies of Perth, to appear and represent the said burgh of Perth in the ensuing Convention of Burghs; signed by the magistrates and inhabitants of Perth".

craftsmen burgesses of Perth met all the qualifications for providing the driving wedge of popular support for religious reform, found to have been present in urban reform movements in France, Germany and England.⁵⁹

But, just as it was the craftsmen with the most to gain who were the most supportive of the Reformation in other towns, so too in Perth. Whether they intended to or not, the craftsmen burgesses of Perth admitted that they did not have the support of all craftsmen in their dispute with the merchants. At least by the summer of 1560, if not before, the movers and shakers in Perth were in their own words "the leirnit craftismen in prentischip".⁶⁰ In the "Representation to Parliament", the authors admitted that all the craftsmen of Perth who belonged to unincorporated trades had sided with the merchant burgesses against those craftsmen who were seeking parity with the merchants. This may not have been the case earlier in the movement, but in all likelihood there were probably always dissenters amongst the craftsmen.

This admission makes it quite clear that the supporters of protestantism in Perth were the upwardly mobile craftsmen from the established and recognized trades who had some entrée into the power structure of the burgh, but who wanted more. They hoped that by combining their political and social aspirations with their support for religious reform, that they would indeed advance in all three spheres. Although they attached the secular goals to the religious ideal their protestant belief was strong and genuine. It is almost impossible to find any recusants in Perth in the 1560s and 70s, attesting to a very complete conversion of the whole town. The strength of this conversion may well have been due to the understanding of some of the leading craftsmen burgesses who were able to convert the whole town convincingly. One commentator, in discussing the Scottish manner of adaptation to religious reform in the sixteenth century put it this way: "A few rare souls showed utter confidence and conviction and a great number of people agonized".⁶¹ The Perth evidence, provided by the documents in the Craftsmen's Collection suggests that a few of the "rare souls" lived in Perth in the 1540s and 50s.

⁵⁹ Dickens *The German Nation and Martin Luther*, 188, 218-19; Ozment *The Reformation in the Cities*, 131; Davis, "The Sacred and the Body Social in Lyons", *Past and Present*, 90 (1981), 47-50; P. Clark "Reformation and Radicalism in Kentish Towns c. 1500-1553", *The Urban Classes, The Nobility and the Reformation*, ed. W. J. Mommsen (Stuttgart, 1979), 118-122.

⁶⁰ CB, no. 34.

⁶¹ J. Wormald, *Court Kirk and Community Scotland 1470-1625* (London, 1981), 107-08.